UNDERSTANDING THE ROLES OF THE COMMANDER, PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER AND THE MEDIA

by Captain James E. Hutton, USA, Military Analyst, Center for Army Lessons Learned

"The bottom line is that public affairs is a commander's task. Today and in the future, the media will be wherever we are, and those same media will be the link with the American people. As commanders, we must follow the adage -- train in peacetime as you would fight in war -- and that includes working with the media." 1

--Major General Paul E. Funk

Introduction

Commanders are accustomed to taking on leadership roles in areas that are not typically associated with their basic branch. A field artillery brigade commander, for example, may find himself commanding a *kaserne* in Germany. Although he may not have had any particular training or relevant experience running an installation, he is expected to provide leadership to maintain and improve the installation, develop and supervise engineer projects, and manage a myriad of other associated tasks.

One function of senior leadership lies in the area of public affairs. Although officers in the professional development schools are given blocks of instruction on public affairs issues, such instruction can only serve as familiarization. Much of what the commander learns about public affairs comes from on-the-job training with his public affairs officer (PAO). Additionally, much of what the commander learns about dealing with the media comes from perceptions, or misperceptions, accumulated from years of watching television or reading newspapers.

The purpose of this article is to give commanders a description of what to do to personally affect positive public affairs programs, what to expect from public affairs officers, and to detail the needs of the media. It is important for the commander to recognize the public affairs program belongs to him. He is ultimately the most credible and knowledgeable center for information about his command. Of course, as with all staff functions, he relies on the expertise provided by trained staff officers, civilians, and non-commissioned officers to supervise and improve his public affairs program. It is useful for him to understand how to determine the relative abilities of PAO. Finally, understanding the roles and needs of the media is also important in developing an effective public affairs program. The media and its wide and varied formats provides the conduit to the America people and, in many instances, our leaders. Knowing the institution is imperative.

The Commander's Role

Installation commanders should conduct visits to local newspaper editors and television and radio station managers shortly after assumption of command. "Determine who is

the dominant personality in the business. You cannot be guided by titles. There are more titles than offices in the newspaper industry."² The same can be said for the various forms of electronic media including television, radio, and on-line services.

No one is more important in telling the Army's story, or the local portion of it, than the commander. By visiting the key local media centers, the new commander can eliminate barriers with editors and publishers. He will not be a faceless "government official," but instead he will become a person the local personalities feel is interested in their community.

The commander should consider conducting the following public affairs activities early in command:

- Offer each key media person a personally guided visit of the installation. "Whatever you do, make him feel he always will be welcome and that your command will endeavor to help him in any way possible." 3
- **Provide a short (a minute or less) taped "hello"** speech for local radio stations. Provide a comparable video product for television outlets. Write an editorial for the local paper briefly listing your goals and objectives for the organization.
- Attend routine community relations meetings, such as business-military
 affairs committee assemblies in the local area, and get to know the key figures.
 Such meetings are usually attended by PAOs, community relations officers, or
 sometimes garrison commanders. The senior commander's presence on
 occasion lets the community at-large know there is keen command interest in the
 community.

Another crucial element in setting the base for the new commander's public affairs program is the development of command messages. Command messages are central points to be made when encountering the media. Although the command messages are usually related to a certain situation, the commander must begin early in considering what messages he wants the public to understand. While it is clear the media ultimately decides what to publish or broadcast, it is equally important to know that what he relates to the media, either personally or through a PAO, is very likely to be in final published or broadcast products. It is critical that the commander articulates the key points (usually three to five main points with supporting information) to the PAO as the PAO plans for media relations.

The Functions of the Public Affairs Officer

The PAO is the key staff officer responsible for providing information to the public for the command. As a practical matter, for most issues the PAO is the command spokesman and, as such, must be well prepared for his position. There are several aspects to being a PAO that a new commander can quickly use to assess the level of capabilities of his PAO.

- The PAO should be "thoroughly familiar with all facets of your command." The PAO should be able to give a full command briefing that relates your unit's missions, capabilities, training methods, major weapons systems, equipment platforms, on-going projects, historical summary, and command philosophy.
- He should relate the types and numbers of items contributed to the Hometown News Release program. This Army-Air Force program provides local outlets nation-wide with personal stories about soldiers and airmen. The PAO should diligently manage this program and provide the command a list of items eligible for inclusion.
- The PAO must understand Field Manual (FM) 46-1, *Public Affairs Operations*. The FM provides the doctrinal basis for all public affairs activities.
- Look at the public affairs office table of distribution and allowances (TDA) or
 modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE), depending on the type of
 unit, and make inquires of the PAO as to the status of key equipment. Such
 equipment usually includes digital cameras, publishing software and hardware,
 recording equipment, broadcast equipment (if applicable), and vehicle support to
 name a few items.
- Determine if the PAO's standard operating procedures (SOP) adequately cover the spectrum of public affairs to include media relations, community relations, and command information. SOPs should cover procedures for the release of information, a community relations event plan, and contracts related to production of command information items.
- Direct the PAO to give you examples of articles appearing in the local paper for the last six months. Do the articles cover the unit's or installation's missions well?
 Are articles centered on a single unit or agency? Are there too many "commander" articles?
- Does the PAO office have PA Link software installed and in use? PA Link
 provides a wealth of PA resources for practitioners. Included in it are recent
 speeches, forums for idea sharing, new PA products such as digital imagery, and
 PA updates.
- Determine the status of the speaker's bureau. Are speakers regularly used at local events? If the PAO is to be the commander's speech writer, the commander should review the PAO's speech file.
- Ascertain from the PAO any special projects or efforts to interest the media in the command. Does the PAO regularly send information to new media outlets? Is there a clear plan to attract different media sources to the command?
- Require the PAO to describe his accident reporting plan in detail. Performing
 public affairs functions following accidents or during crises is crucial to a
 successful program. A poorly executed media relations plan for such events can
 seriously undermine the effectiveness of PA programs as a whole.
- Ask the PAO about the PA representative at higher headquarters. Is public affairs guidance (PAG) given on a routine basis for Army-wide activities? What are the requirements for clearance of PA events beyond regulatory guidelines? Who is the PAO at the higher headquarters?

It is vital to articulate that the function of the PAO is important to the unit's or installation's ability to accomplish its mission. By ensuring the PAO's ability to accomplish his myriad of tasks, the commander will gain full credibility with the local community and media and enhance the stature of the Army.

Understanding the Media

Media are a diverse group serving a vast array of outlets. The overwhelming majority of publishers and broadcasters impose high standards of ethical conduct and want only the truth in print or airing.

It is useful to separate the trashy tabloid, aimed at sensation, and major dailies which aggressively seek accurate stories. Tabloids rely on rumor, eavesdropping, questionable informants, and, on some occasions, outright fabrication to sell editions. The major dailies and networks, conversely, depend on reliable sources, a check or confirmation of the sources, official records, and independent experts for stories.

When using so-called "reliable but anonymous" sources, the credibility of the company is on the line -- this is not something the major outlets view lightly. But, one may ask, is it not important for the major outlets to also sell ad space or airtime? The answer is yes, of course, which is why reporters are so assertive in gathering information.

More often that not, two primary factors lead to the holding of the media in low esteem: (1) A personal dislike of article content. For example, a straight news article covering the resignation of a favorite politician will often be viewed as negative or slanted reporting by loyal followers, or (2) A lack of understanding of what journalists consider to be news.

Most news outlets use the following elements to determine newsworthiness: Immediacy, proximity, consequence, conflict, oddity, sex appeal, emotion, prominence, suspense, and progress.⁵ The more factors present, the more likely the story will run. Using these elements, one can understand why the O.J. Simpson trial captivated the media (and the public). The trial was live (IMMEDIATE). Simpson (a PROMINENT athlete), was on trial for his life (CONSEQUENCE, SUSPENSE, CONFLICT). One could also say the case was unusual because of the stature of Simpson (ODDITY).

Many will dispute the true "newsworthiness" of such a trial, but the massive numbers of daily viewers demonstrated why news organizations cover particular events with such vigor.

In their eagerness to cover stories, journalists sometimes make mistakes. Many mistakes are often the result of incomplete information or preliminary findings which, upon analysis, do not square with the facts. It is up to commanders and public affairs officers to educate members of the media while addressing their needs in the appropriate format.

Conclusion

Public affairs operations will continue to have a significant role in the overall conduct of military activities. The U.S. Army, with its constitutionally-based charter, is an institution fundamentally necessary to the success of our great democratic experiment. Public affairs is a commander's program and requires the personal attention of the commander. On a day-to-day basis, the commander relies on his principle staff officer for public affairs, the PAO. The PAO must demonstrate competencies across the spectrum of public affairs including media relations, community relations, and command information. To be effective, he will need to exercise diligence and innovation to tell his unit's and the Army's story. Finally, both the commander and PAO must understand the needs of the media. The media has wide interests. Commanders and PAOs can ensure the needs of the media and the Army are met by providing accurate, timely, and useful information. The American public must retain confidence in its military leaders -- by demonstrating leadership in public affairs, commanders will fulfill this need into the 21st century.

Leader's Media Tips

- Think clearly about what may be printed or aired the next day. Although some in the media are loose with contextual use of quotes, rarely do the more established outlets use outright fabrication.
- **Speak about what you know**. If you don't know the answer, simply say "I don't know." That answer rarely appears in print.
- **Inject command messages**. In addition to answering completely and honestly, if you have a reservoir of command message facts, use them. (The underlying theme here is: the interviewer chooses the questions -- you choose the answer.)
- Questions won't be there. Just as with electronic media, the questions will not appear in the article. Don't worry about tailoring your answer for the interviewer's benefit.
- **Think first**. Stop and think before answering. Correct answers are more important than deadlines.
- Negative Backflow. If the interviewer uses a negative catch-phrase, such as
 "sex scandal," do NOT use the word or phrase as part of your answer. Example:
 "What are you doing about the Army's sex scandal?" Bad answer: "The sex scandal investigations are ongoing." Better answer: "We are committed to investigating this matter and will take appropriate actions as necessary."
- Everything counts. Don't forget: YOU ARE ON THE RECORD. Your conversation may be friendly but this is a business meeting -- stick to business.
- **Consistency**. Just as you will use and reuse common themes, the interviewers often ask the same questions in different ways -- stay consistent.
- Know the question. If you don't understand the question, make the interviewer rephrase. Know the question you are answering.

- "No Comment" looks like you are hiding something. DO NOT say "no comment." If necessary, defer to the escorting PAO. PAOs can often assist in providing background materials.
- Stay in your lane. If you are not the Secretary of Defense or his designated spokesman, steer clear of answering for him. Talk about your area of expertise.

Notes:

- 1. Paul E. Funk, Major General, U.S. Army, "Accommodating the Wartime Media: A Commander's Task," *Military Review*, April 1993, pg. 78.
- 2. Howard S. Wilcox, Brigadier General, U.S. Army, "Press Relations and the Commander," *Military Review*, August 1961, pg. 5.
- 3. Ibid., p. 5.
- 4. Ibid., p. 6.
- 5. *Journalism Handbook*, "What is News?," (Fort Benjamin Harrison: Defense Information School, 1994), pp. 11-13.